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C O N F I D E N T I A L PARIS 001922

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SUBJECT: FRANCE WILL SUPPORT BELARUS TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

REF: STATE 46976

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER COUNSELOR JOSIAH ROSENBLATT, FOR REAS
ONS 1.4 B/D

1. (C) On March 24, Poloff delivered reftel demarche on expanding a visa ban against Belarusian officials to Antoine Gosset, the MFA's Belarus desk officer. Gosset said the MFA was examining the legal implications of extending the visa ban to include Aleksandr Lukashenka, given the lack of precedent for banning a head of state. He said that France would likely not propose adding Lukashenka to a visa ban, but would support such a ban if another EU member took the lead in proposing it. When asked if there were any recalcitrant EU members on extending a visa ban to include Lukashenka, Gosset said Italy's position was "ambiguous." Gosset, who had been in Belarus as an election observer, said the Italian Ambassador had been photographed with Lukashenka on election day; this had been a propaganda victory for Lukashenka. Italy's position "needed to be clarified," said Gosset.

2. (C) Following announcement later on March 24 of a EU visa ban that included Lukashenka, Gosset said France would push for the asset freezing of top Belarusian officials. Significant holdings were concentrated in Austria, said Gosset. Furthermore, Gosset said the EU would raise Belarus during the EU-Russia summit on May 25 and during Russia's upcoming presidency of the Council of Europe. (Comment: In contrast to virtually every other former Soviet space foreign policy issue, France appears unconcerned about the Russian reaction to their tough line on Belarus. This is probably due to the EU's leading role, which lowers the profile of French involvement. End comment)
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Stapleton